



THE NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

# Reviewing Stand

EVANSTON, ILLINOIS

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## Do We Treat Our Convicts Right?

A radio discussion over WGN and the Mutual Broadcasting System

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AN EX-CONVICT

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Broadcast continuously since 1934 by Northwestern University



**THE REVIEWING STAND** is a weekly radio forum presented by Northwestern University. The program was first broadcast by Station WGN, Chicago, October 14, 1934. It has been on the air continuously since that time, originating in the WGN studios, and, since 1935, carried by stations of the Mutual Broadcasting System. **THE REVIEWING STAND** presents members of the Northwestern University faculty and distinguished guests from business, government, education, and the press in round table discussions of contemporary problems—the questions that are in the news. The program is under the direction of James H. McBurney, Dean of the School of Speech, Northwestern University, and Miss Myrtle Stahl, Director of Educational Programs, WGN, Chicago.

The Northwestern University Reviewing Stand, published weekly beginning May 2, 1943, by the Offices of the Director of Radio (Public Relations), Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois. Entered as second class matter at the Post Office, Evanston, Illinois, under the Act of March 3, 1875. Subscription price, \$1.00 for 16 weeks, \$2.00 for 32 weeks, \$2.50 for one year. Single copies, ten cents.



# Do We Treat Our Convicts Right?

**MR. BORIN:** Before we hear from our guests I would like to have you listen with me to a portion of a transcribed interview with an ex-convict—a man who experienced life behind prison walls. His background was usual—a broken home, time in a training school for boys, beatings administered by a cruel stepfather, drifting from job to job . . . We now hear our ex-convict—let's call him Joe—tell about the crime he committed just before he was sent to prison.

## 'I Needed Money'

**JOE:** I didn't know how to do many things—couldn't do much to make a living except washing dishes. At the time I was feeling like I was too good to be washing dishes. I got broke, so I was needing money pretty badly and I had the old thought, "I got a dollar out of the mail once, maybe I can do it again." I went into an apartment house and found a couple of letters in the mailbox, took them, opened them up, nothing in them, and stuck them in my pocket. I still needed money. I went up on to the second floor. It was a summer night and it was pretty hot. There were two rooms open. In one room there was a man and a woman in there. I looked in the other and there was just a man alone. I figured if they woke up, I would have a better chance with the man alone than against the man and woman. I went in there—

**INTERVIEWER:** Pretty dark?

**JOE:** Yes, it was pretty dark. The only light was 15 or 20 feet down the hall. The man had his pants hung up in the clothes closet. I went in there and just got my hands on his wallet when he woke up and took me down and called the police.

**INTERVIEWER:** Any scuffling? Did you try to run away?

**JOE:** I knew I was caught because I was right there in the closet with the door closed and all he had to do

was open the door and grab me. I was taken down to the police station and they found the letters on me and turned me over to the federal authorities. As a result, I was given a sentence for mail theft for five years. I was 14 years old at the time.

**INTERVIEWER:** Five years for the mail theft, not the attempt to steal the wallet?

**JOE:** There is one time when I say the truth did not pay. My mother had always raised me to believe that an oath was the most sacred thing in the world. When I got in the court, I swore to tell the truth, the whole truth, and so forth. I was bound and determined I was going to do that, and the judge asked me, "Son, do you think you would ever do this again?"

"Your Honor, if it was under the same circumstances, I believe I would." If I had said "No," I would have gotten a year and a day or 18 months. As it was he gave me five years and he wanted to give me six and a half until I was 21, but he couldn't.

## No Representation

**INTERVIEWER:** What about your counsel? Who was it represented you then?

**JOE:** I am not sure that I had one. I waived trial by jury—

**INTERVIEWER:** Obviously.

**JOE:** Obviously guilty, I was caught with the goods. I didn't figure a lawyer would do me any good. I didn't call one of my own. I didn't have the funds for it anyway.

**INTERVIEWER:** How about when you went to serve your term, you were 14?

**JOE:** Yes.

**INTERVIEWER:** How was life in the institution?

JOE: Well, it was pretty rough. There again, I was one of the youngest fellows in the institution.

INTERVIEWER: Trouble?

JOE: Plenty of it. I had a couple dozen fights in the months that I was there.

INTERVIEWER: Big guys? Couldn't you fight your way out of them?

JOE: You can't fight when three pile on at once. They don't come at you one at a time.

INTERVIEWER: I can see that might develop into something pretty sad. How long did you stay in prison?

JOE: Sixteen months.

INTERVIEWER: When you look back on that, do you feel that the time you spent in prison made you a better man? Did you feel you were penalized? Did you feel when you came out that you were going to start over?

JOE: I definitely felt I had been penalized.

INTERVIEWER: In what way?

JOE: Well, I had come to have a more sincere appreciation of my rights to freedom. The freedom to do what I wanted when I wanted.

INTERVIEWER: You were free before you went to prison?

JOE: Footloose and fancy-free, so to speak. Just a complete opposite, the prison life was.

INTERVIEWER: Did it get under your skin after a while?

JOE: Definitely.

## Monotony

INTERVIEWER: What part of it particularly?

JOE: The monotony, the same old thing day in and day out.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that was a conscious effort on their part to create the monotony, or is it a by-product?

JOE: I think it is a by-product.

INTERVIEWER: They would try to vary it for you if they could, but they can't?

JOE: Yes, I think they would.

INTERVIEWER: What did you learn while you were in prison?

JOE: I got my start in the printing trade.

INTERVIEWER: Were you a pretty good printer by the time you got out in 16 months?

JOE: I could set up a job for them, feed a press, or operate a linotype.

INTERVIEWER: That's pretty good.

JOE: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Then you were granted a parole after 16 months. You were supposed to be in for five and a half years?

JOE: Five years.

INTERVIEWER: Five years. At the end of 16 months you were granted a parole. Where did you go when you got out?

JOE: I went down to a small town weekly newspaper. The manager of the newspaper was my adviser.

INTERVIEWER: Did you get the usual suit and \$10, whatever it is they give you?

## No Funds

JOE: Well, I got the suit. The \$10 didn't come with it.

MR. BORIN: You heard the ex-convict say that he got a suit but the \$10 didn't come with it. Down at Stateville, what do you give a convict when he walks out the gate of the prison, Warden Ragen?

MR. RAGEN: We give them a complete dress-out, new suit, underwear, shoes, hat, overcoat in season. I am glad to say Illinois has remedied a condition that has existed for a great many years by passing a law at the last session of the legislature and signed by the Governor whereby men who are deserving and have no funds



will be given as much as \$50 upon their release. I think it is certainly one of the grandest things that has happened in penal reform in a good many years.

MR. BORIN: In a recent publication about prison life, it was stated, "In spite of federal reform in 1930, a decade later found corporal punishment (a very gentle word for brutality) still being used in half of our state penitentiaries." Would you agree with that statement, Ohlin?

MR. OHLIN: I suspect you are referring to *My Six Convicts*, which has been a best seller in the last few months. Actually, this, among other things in the book, is a misrepresentation of the case. I think corporal punishment today is dying out fast all over the country, particularly in our best institutions, the federal and leading state institutions. It was abolished some years ago. Prison administrators are beginning to find out that other forms of punishment, like loss of privileges and so forth, offer a better system of control than corporal punishment has ever been.

MR. BORIN: What is the situation with respect to corporal punishment at Stateville, Warden Ragen?

### Corporal Punishment

MR. RAGEN: We do not have corporal punishment in any form. I don't believe in it. I don't think it helps a man, and in this particular book, *My Six Convicts*, I think the author was way off base in misinforming the reading public as he did. I think it is a great injustice to the federal prisons of America and all prison administrators today.

MR. BORIN: The author spends some time on the "stool-pigeon" system. Would you describe that system for us, Ohlin?

MR. OHLIN: The "stool-pigeon" system is something that used to be in existence a number of years ago, but is fast becoming obsolete, along with other old practices. The stool-pigeon system is based on the idea that there

is a certain loyalty among convicts, that they will not in effect tell the administrators anything about one another's conduct. This may have been the case back in the early days of prison history. It seems to be fast becoming a myth. The fairer treatment prisoners now get in prisons seems to be breaking down the resentment which prisoners used to feel toward the administrative authorities.

MR. BORIN: In the publication I mentioned previously, we find this description of a punishment cell: "Even in the newer institutions there is no running water in these cells, toilet facilities being provided by an open bucket. The modern cell may measure 7 feet high, 6 feet long and 4 feet wide. Or it may be a tight-fitting cage mentioned before, which prohibits movement of any kind. The hands and feet of the prisoner are sometimes chained to the floor in such a way that he must remain for hours in a crouched position in awful pain." Warden Ragen, how would you evaluate that description?

MR. RAGEN: I don't think it is true, and I know that it isn't true at Stateville because our cells are about 15 feet deep and 8 feet wide. They have a large window, about 6 by 4 in each cell. There is running water in them and certainly no one is chained. No corporal punishment is used in any form. I think that applies to many institutions.

### Solitary Confinement

MR. OHLIN: The term "solitary confinement" or "isolation" as it is sometimes called, is really a misnomer. These men are not isolated nor are they in solitary. Actually they are placed or confined in a cell for a certain length of time, but they are—

MR. BORIN: What is that length of time?

MR. RAGEN: Fifteen days at our institution, maximum. The average stay is three days.

MR. BORIN: Is that usual for state penitentiaries?

MR. RAGEN: I would say so.

MR. OHLIN: Several men are generally put in the cell at the same time and they will stay there for varying periods—from a day to 15 days in Illinois. I think it is much the same in other states.

MR. RAGEN: I think that is right. We don't know that building as "solitary" at all. We know it as "isolation," and the inmates understand it as that. It does isolate them from their general assignments and they are confined for the period of time the court gives them for violation of prison rules.

### Prisoner's Work

MR. BORIN: We have been talking about various types of so-called punishment. In another direction, what kind of work are prisoners expected to do?

MR. RAGEN: Prisoners are expected to do an ordinary day's work in our shops and schools, and on every assignment, but no one is overworked, and most men beg for more work. In fact, I think there are very few prisons in America today where a man has as many hours of work as he would like. The days are too long for him, he has time on his hands, and he would like to be employed longer if at all possible.

MR. BORIN: The penitentiary at Stateville is famous for its malaria ward. Ohlin, could you tell us about that?

MR. OHLIN: The malaria experiment was started during the war and contributed a great deal to the understanding of malaria. In fact, it contributed to the development of a drug which they now feel provides very nearly a 100% cure for malaria. Warden Ragen was responsible for opening the penitentiary for this kind of an experiment. A number of other medical experiments are being carried out throughout the country. Perhaps he would like to add something to that.

MR. RAGEN: I might say that 1300 men participated in the malaria program. They gave their all during the war, beginning in 1944, to the present day, and the results have been very gratifying to the army and all concerned. These men became very sick. Fever of 104 and 105 was ordinary. One man's fever ran to 108.2. But they have reached a point now where they feel they have a cure for malaria. I believe this is true because they have cured men who have been bitten by malarial-infected mosquitoes. They cured them with this drug without any trouble at all.

### Recreation

MR. BORIN: What kind of recreational activities are provided? I assume you don't have cross-country running! (laughter)

MR. RAGEN: No, we don't. We provide a good recreational program. One of our big activities is the outside ball game. A team comes in from the outside every Saturday and plays the men at our institution. I am sorry to say yesterday we lost our game, but we win a good percentage of them.

MR. BORIN: What do you need? A new pitcher?

MR. RAGEN: We need a new pitcher very badly. (laughter)

MR. BORIN: I don't know how to solve that problem for you!

MR. RAGEN: We have softball, handball, tennis, basketball, horse shoes, picture shows, and a number of other things.

MR. BORIN: Do your inmates have a chance to learn a trade or achieve an education?

MR. RAGEN: Oh, yes. A man has the opportunity of learning one or more of 35 vocations taught at the institution, and men with less than an eighth grade education must go to school. When they finish the eighth grade, they are given a diploma by the county superintendent of schools of the county in which the institution



is located—Will County—with no identification on it, so far as the institution is concerned. The men who finish high school are given the General Education Tests by the local high school at Joliet, and if they pass, they are so credited. We graduate around 60 men every year out of our high school, and 75 to 80 out of our grade school.

MR. BORIN: That is out of a total prison population of how many?

MR. RAGEN: Thirty-one hundred at Stateville.

### Education

MR. OHLIN: Many of these men come down very ill-prepared and ill-equipped to live on the outside in terms of having some kind of vocational skill or any kind of educational achievement. When they come down and receive this kind of training they tend to acquire, it seems to me, a new conception of themselves. They feel they have gained a new status, that they are better equipped to go out. They tend to go out with greater confidence with this kind of training behind them. In this sense, therefore, this becomes a very important, and perhaps one of the most important aspects of prison treatment.

MR. BORIN: Is there any reluctance at all on the part of your inmates to take advantage of these opportunities? For example, are they a little reluctant to enter school?

MR. RAGEN: No. Most men with little education want it and they accept it and appreciate it. So many men try to get into vocational trades that we don't have room for them. We have to take them in turn. Our institution is so large—we have so many men—that we are not able to accommodate everyone who would like to participate.

MR. BORIN: Who teaches these classes?

MR. RAGEN: We have an outside, qualified teacher in charge of every shop and vocation, but we use inmate teachers.

MR. BORIN: You mean you have inmates who are teachers?

MR. RAGEN: Oh, yes. We have men there from every walk of life, every profession.

MR. BORIN: Doctors and ministers?

MR. RAGEN: Doctors, ministers, every profession. I don't think there is any vocation missing. I don't know of a warden being in Joliet. (laughter)

### Housing

MR. BORIN: We are happy to know that. We are also interested in how our prisoners are housed. Would you describe a typical cell for us, Warden Ragen?

MR. RAGEN: Yes, Stateville is the only prison in America that has circular cell houses, and they are round, of course, and the cells are on the outside wall. Each cell has an outside window.

MR. BORIN: A room with a view. (laughter)

MR. RAGEN: The cells are about 7 feet across, 12 feet deep and eight feet high. They are equipped with a toilet, lavatory, and earphones for the choice of one of three radio programs. They are pretty well equipped. However, they are not the most pleasant places to be in. I realize that no man likes to be in a cell.

MR. BORIN: Do you have one or two men in each cell?

MR. RAGEN: Unfortunately, we have to have more than one man in a cell. I would like to have one man in every cell, but it takes a lot of money to build cell houses.

MR. OHLIN: Another comment that has frequently been made about the round cell houses, Warden, is that the designer of the round houses forgot, from a security standpoint, that although the guard could watch the prisoners from the center of the cell house, the prisoners could also watch the guard.

MR. RAGEN: That is true. It isn't a good thing. However, Stateville hap-

pens to be a maximum security institution and it probably would affect us more than a minimum security institution. Another thing, where you have more than one man in a cell, you can never get two men or three men to agree on the amount of ventilation, amount of heat and so on. I am sure that in Illinois, because we have advanced in the past eight or nine years by leaps and bounds, we will take care of that when we have the money to do it.

MR. BORIN: Ohlin, can you tell us about some of the significant improvements that have been made in recent years in treating prisoners?

### Treatment of Prisoners

MR. OHLIN: I think the most significant changes that have occurred in prison administration and prison treatment have taken place in the area of classification and treatment programs themselves. There has been a change in philosophy in the recognition now that prison time should not be wasted, but it should be used profitably in some way to retrain, re-educate, and to change the thinking of these men. We regard this as the only right position to take for it provides the only real protection for society in the end. The classification programs have developed very rapidly in recent years throughout the country. After they are admitted to prison, in nearly all of our better institutions, the men are subject to a period of segregation during which they are analyzed and diagnosed by psychologists and psychiatrists. They are then classified to various institutions throughout the system in terms of their ability to improve, to take advantage of treatment, in terms of their age, and frequently their geographic location in order that they might be close to home for visits.

MR. BORIN: Is this classification system used in the selection of jobs for the prisoners?

MR. RAGEN: Illinois is moving in that

direction very fast, and it is going to be a great move forward when we can do that. Classification reports are read with a lot of interest and followed where possible. As time goes on, I am sure we will be able to take care of the needs of every man as the board finds them.

### Prisons Too Large?

MR. BORIN: Up to this point in our discussion you have presented a rather rosy picture. Are there any problems we still face? I think, Warden Ragen, you mentioned that our prisons tend to be too large for effective administration. Would you expand on that?

MR. RAGEN: That is true. An ideal prison, in my opinion, would not have more than 500 men, and a thousand would be all the men that should be in any one institution. We should house only men of the same type. In that way, you are able to give individual treatment, you are able to do more for a man, to understand his needs. He, in turn, will understand the employees of the institution who desire to help him during his stay. When we get to the place where we can drop our prison population down, I think we will step forward.

MR. OHLIN: The fact that our prisons are too big seems to be fairly well recognized now by prison authorities, and the trend today is to build smaller institutions and more of them in order to break down the need for mass treatment of the kind we have. But we are still stuck with these big prisons.

MR. BORIN: Do we lack competent personnel to run our prisons?

MR. OHLIN: Competent personnel is always a problem where the salaries are low and the chief remuneration from the job comes through the satisfaction or gratification you receive from seeing a man make it on the outside.

MR. BORIN: What is the over-all object in keeping a man in prison? Are we interested in punishment, or are



we more interested in rehabilitation?

MR. RAGEN: I don't think anyone is interested in punishment any more. I think it becomes our duty to confine a man after he has been sentenced for violating the laws of society, but most people in prison work would like to release that man back to society better equipped to carry on as a law-abiding citizen. By all means, society should accept that man and should not point a finger at him, and should help him in every way possible because he has paid a debt that has been asked by the court at the time of his sentence and he is entitled to another chance.

MR. BORIN: Were you ever accused of a "creampuff" philosophy when you talked like this?

### Discipline

MR. RAGEN: I don't think anyone has ever accused me of being a creampuff. I am a strict disciplinarian; however, I try to be fair.

MR. OHLIN: I think Warden Ragen has recognized, as have other administrators throughout the country, that the best control of the criminal after he is released is in terms of changing his thinking, his notion about criminal acts, so that he acquires a new conception of himself and the awareness that these acts are wrong in themselves and can play no successful part in his future adjustment.

MR. BORIN: You are moving in the direction of the prisoner now, which leads me to this question: How does the prisoner look at life when he is confined?

MR. RAGEN: Of course, no prisoner wants to be confined. That is the principal punishment, his confinement and prison routine. Of course, they are all individuals, and their cases are all individual cases. Some men accept confinement easier than others. Others are never adjusted, but they represent a very small percentage; a greater percentage do adjust themselves and accept the routine.

MR. BORIN: What are the most fre-

quent criticisms we hear from the prison population about their treatment?

MR. OHLIN: The most serious problem for them is the loss of liberty itself. That in itself is perhaps the greatest punishment of all.

MR. BORIN: Our ex-convict, Joe, explained that it was probably not the fault of the administrators themselves, but was merely a by-product of the prison system.

### Routinization

MR. OHLIN: He was referring to loss of liberty, but also to the routinization that goes on in prison. The problems this creates are severe. Little things become big things when you are doing the same thing every day.

MR. BORIN: Is the character of our prison population changing?

MR. OHLIN: I would say it is. As far as I have been able to determine, the prisoners as they were admitted years ago were recruited from organized groups in our society, predatory groups of offenders. Today they tend to be individual offenders.

MR. BORIN: What type of man does it take to make a good warden? I will ask Warden Ragen that question.

MR. RAGEN: I don't know how to answer that. First of all, the man must be fair, he must be willing to give and take. He must be a man who does not carry grudges against anyone, he must forgive and forget. He must be strict, but fair at all times.

MR. BORIN: I always characterized a prison warden as being over six feet tall and weighing 235 pounds. You don't necessarily have to have those physical requirements?

MR. RAGEN: No, sir. You can be four feet and have a good head, and I think make a good prison warden.

MR. BORIN: What role does the chaplain play in the prison?

MR. OHLIN: He plays an important role. The chaplain is a person to whom prisoners can talk and get

straightened out and from whom they can get confidence.

MR. BORIN: Does the chaplain help you, Warden Ragen?

MR. RAGEN: The chaplain is one of the greatest assets we have in the institution. The same applies to our medical men, our dentists, our psychiatrists and sociologists. Every employee in the institution is important if he is the right type.

MR. BORIN: Turning now from the administration of a prison and from the prisoners themselves, I would like

to ask this question about the relation of the citizen to the ex-convict. What can we do as public citizens to aid you in treating our prisoners right?

MR. OHLIN: The public has a very important responsibility. You can have the most effective and efficient administration of correction and correctional personnel, but when the criminal is released if he is to be rejected by the public, then you simply invite further crime.

ANNOUNCER: I'm sorry, gentlemen, but our time is up.



## Suggested Readings

Compiled by William Huff  
and M. Helen Perkins, Reference Department,  
Deering Library, Northwestern University



BARNES, HARRY E. and TEETERS, NEGLEY K. *New Horizons in Criminology*. Prentice-Hall, New York, 1943.

The main purpose of this book is to reveal "... the futility of current attitudes and practices in the fields of criminology and penology ..."

CLEMMER, DONALD. *The Prison Community*. Boston, Christopher, 1940.

The author, as sociologist, "... has been concerned with the study of the social background of the prisoners, with their classification for purposes of segregation, with their training, their treatment, and selection and preparation for parole."

National Conference of Social Work. *Proceedings of the National Conference of Social Work, 1948*. "Peno-Correctional Philosophy in Retrospect." E. J. LUKAS. New York, Columbia University Press, 1949.

A consideration of the progress in penal philosophy since 1870 when 22 principles were formulated to provide better treatment for convicts.

National Probation and Parole Association. *Advances in Understanding the Offender, 1950 Yearbook*. New York, National Probation and Parole Association, 1951.

A collection of papers taken from conferences of the Association which deal with the treatment of offenders in connection with probation and parole.

OHLIN, LLOYD E. *Selection for Parole*. Russell Sage Foundation, New York, 1951.

"This monograph reflects twenty years of experimentation and research in the application of parole prediction methods in Illinois."



ROBINSON, LOUIS N. *Jails*. Winston, Philadelphia, 1944.

"Care and treatment of misdemeanor prisoners in the United States."

WILSON, DONALD POWELL. *My Six Convicts*. Rinehart, New York, 1951.

A highly controversial book dealing with a psychologist's relations with six inmates of Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

*Colliers* 126:18-19, Ag. 19, '50. "Michigan's Happy Convicts Improve the State's Great Parks." H. TITUS.

A constructive form of rehabilitation for criminals benefits not only the offender, but also society.

*International Journal of Religious Education* 26:8, Jan., '50. "School of Religion in a Prison." R. E. LENTZ.

How the "Learning for Life" study program was used in the School of Religion, California State Prison.

*Library Journal* 75:1148-9, Jl., '50. "Survey Shows Poor Libraries in Most Penal Institutions." E. I. FRIEDMAN.

1948 survey of prison libraries in the United States shows progress is being made as prison administrators realize their value to the inmates.

*Prison Journal* 30:60-4, Jl. '50. "Substitutes for Cellular Confinement." N. K. TEETERS.

Suggested penalties, aside from probation, which might be used as substitutes for cellular imprisonment.

*Prison World* p. 14-17, Jl., '49. "Institutional Life: A Program of Social Education." E. I. FRIEDMAN.

Organization and evaluation of the social education course, "Institutional Life," at the United States Penitentiary at Terre Haute, Indiana.

*Prison World* p. 6-9, Jan., '50. "The Michigan Counseling Program." V. FOX.

A discussion of the practicalities of the counseling program at the state prison in Southern Michigan.

*Reader's Digest* 56:61-72, My., '50. "Inside the Prison." J. FINAN.

Guided Group Interaction is regarded by many penologists as a successful method for the rehabilitation of prison inmates.

*Saturday Evening Post* 223:34-5, Nov. 25, '50. "Convicts in Skirts; Westfield State Farm." H. F. PRINGLE and K. PRINGLE.

New York's Westfield State Farm for Women has no armed guards but treats its inmates with "humane decency" using deprivation of liberties as punishment for infraction of rules.

*Saturday Evening Post* 222: Mr. 25, '50 - My. 13, '50. "San Quentin Is My Home." C. T. DUFFY.

In a series of eight articles, "the boss of the world's biggest prison tells what really goes on behind the bars . . ."

*Social Studies* 39:10-16, Jan., '48. "What Should We Do with Our Criminals?" A. T. ROSENBURGER.

The changes in theories, objectives and methods of punishing criminals in the past 150 years.



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